Design Resource

Ajrakh Printing

Traditional craft of block printing and dyeing

by
Prof. Nina Sabnani
IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:
http://www.dsource.in/resource/ajrakh-printing

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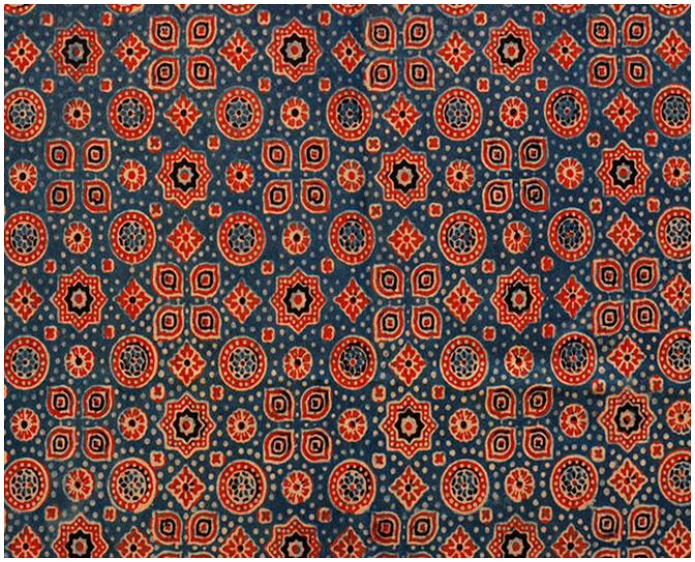
Introduction

Ajrakh is a traditional vegetable dyeing and resist block-printing technique on cloth. It is estimated to be around 4,500 years old. Sindh region (now in Pakistan) is said to be the birthplace of Ajrakh. The Ajrakh artisans in India are originally from Sindh and they migrated to Kutch in Gujarat and Barmer in Rajasthan. Ajrakh is the traditional attire of the Maldhari pastoral community of Bhuj. The men wear it as a lungi (wrapped lower garment), as a turban, or put it on their shoulders.

Artifacts related to Ajrakh have been found in the excavated remains from the Indus valley civilizations- Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Cloth artifacts with similar dyeing techniques have also been found in the Al-Fostat excavations in the Nile delta near Cairo, Egypt.



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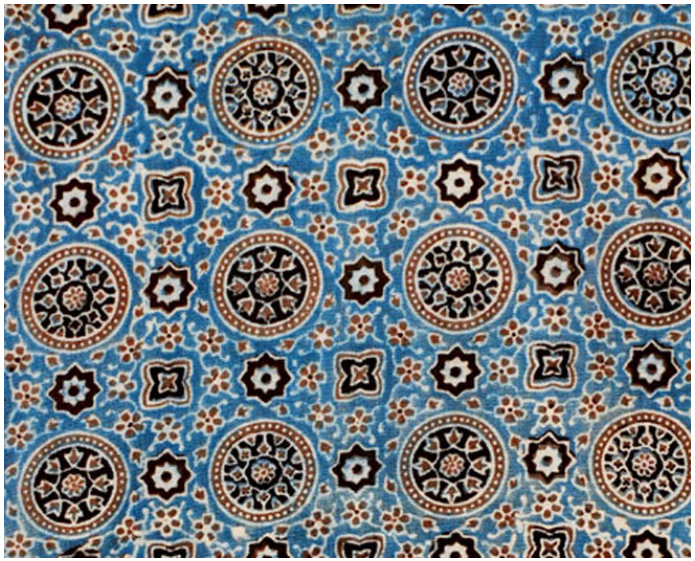
Origin

True origin for the name 'Ajrakh' is unknown. There is a story about a King who loved to change his bed-sheets everyday. The artisans were exhausted making new sheets everyday. One day an artisan who had been working on a technique for many days took this to the King. The king liked it so much that the next day when they were changing the sheets he told his house-keeper to let it stay for the day. Each time the house help tried to change the sheets the King said 'aaj rakh'. The artisans came to call the technique Ajrakh. Another explanation given by Dr. Ismail Khatri about the name is to do with the process. The process involves many days and each layer of color is printed after a gap of time so the cloth has to stay for the day
'Aaj ke din rakh' (Keep it for today) before the next process can begin.



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People

The Khatri community in Kutch, Gujarat; and in Barmer, Rajasthan; carry out the traditional Ajrakh block printing.

Dr. Ismail Mohammad Khatri is a master Ajrakh artisan. He holds an Hon. D. Art from De Montfort University, UK. His ancestors migrated from Sindh around 400 years ago and settled in Dhamarka in Bhuj, Gujarat. Ismail bhai is the 9th generation Ajrakh printer since they migrated from Sindh. After the 2001 earthquake that destroyed their village, they shifted to a new settlement called Ajrakhpur. His two sons, Junaid and Sufiyan have also been trained in the craft and they look after the production now.

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Tools and Raw materials

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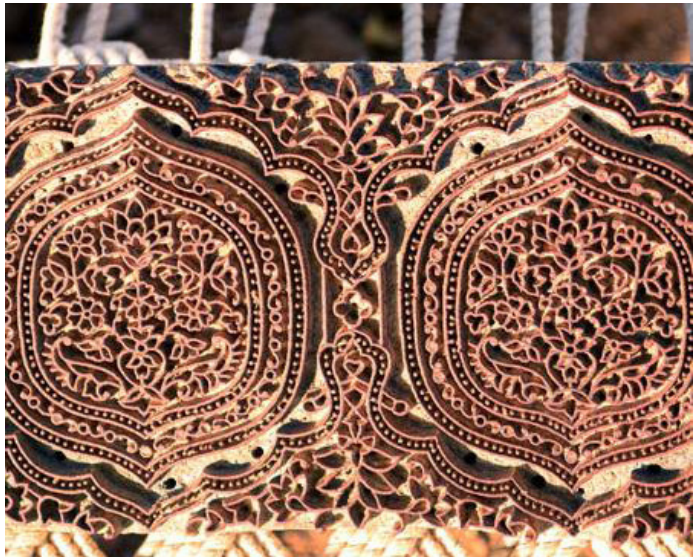

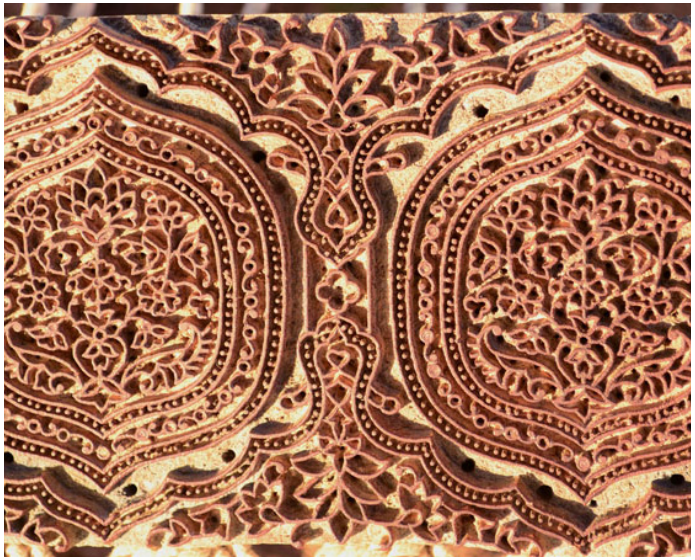

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Ajrakh Process

Stages of Dyeing and Printing

Making Process

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Stages of Dyeing and Printing

Ajrakh is printed as single sided (ekpuri) and double sided (bipuri). Traditional 'Ajrakh' involves various stages of dyeing and resist printing using natural dyes and mordants. Indigo and madder are the primary colours that are used for dyeing. The resist and some colours are printed on the cloth using carved wooden blocks. These blocks are carved with intricate symmetrical patterns so that the same block can be used for both sides of the cloth. Earlier specialist wood carvers made these wooden blocks. Now some of the artisans have learnt the techniques and make the blocks themselves.

The process of 'Ajrakh' is a long drawn process with many stages individually taking days to finish. The process is as follows:

• **Saaj**
Cotton cloth is taken and washed to remove any finish applied in the mill or workshop. It is generally the starch that is to be removed from the cloth. The cloth is soaked in a solution of camel dung, soda ash and castor oil. It is then wrung out and kept overnight. The next day the cloth is semi-dried in the sun and then soaked in the solution again. This process of Saaj and drying is repeated for about 7-8 times until the cloth foams when rubbed. It is then washed in plain water.

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• Kasano

The cloth is washed in a solution of Myrobalan; which is the powdered nut of the Harde tree. Myrobalan acts as the first mordant in the dyeing process. The cloth is sun dried on both sides. The excess myrobalan on the cloth after drying is brushed off.

• Khariyanu

A resist of lime (used for whitewash) and gum arabic (Babool tree resin) is printed onto the cloth to outline the design motifs that will be white. This outline printing is known as Rekh. The resist is printed to both sides of the cloth using carved wooden blocks. These wooden blocks have registration marks in the design carved symmetrically to enable double sided printing.

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• **Kat**

Scrap iron, jaggery is mixed with water and left for about 20 days. This makes the water ferrous. This ferrous water is then mixed with tamarind seed powder and boiled into a paste. This paste is used for black printing. This paste is called Kat. The paste is printed onto both sides of the cloth.

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• Gach

Alum, clay and gum arabic are mixed into a paste used for the next resist printing. A resist of lime and gum arabic is also printed at this time. This combined stage is called as Gach. Sawdust or finely powdered cow dung is sprinkled on to the printed areas to protect the clay from smudging. After Gach printing, the cloth is left to dry naturally for 3-4 days.

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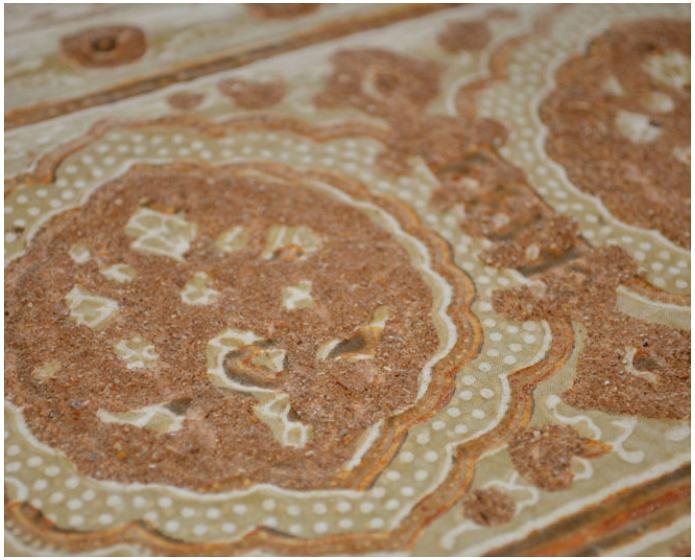

• **Indigo dyeing**
The cloth is dyed in indigo. It is dried in the sun and then dyed again in indigo twice to ensure a uniform colour.

• **Vichharnu**
The cloth is washed thoroughly to remove all of the resist print and unfixed dye.

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• Rang

The cloth is then boiled with Alizarine (synthetic madder) to give the alum-residue areas a bright red colour. Alum acts as a mordant to help fix the red colour. The grey areas from the black printing stages get a deep shade. For other colours the cloth is boiled with a different dye. Madder root (Sanskrit. Manjishtha root) gives an orange colour, Henna gives a light yellowish-green colour, and Rhubarb root gives a pale brownish colour.

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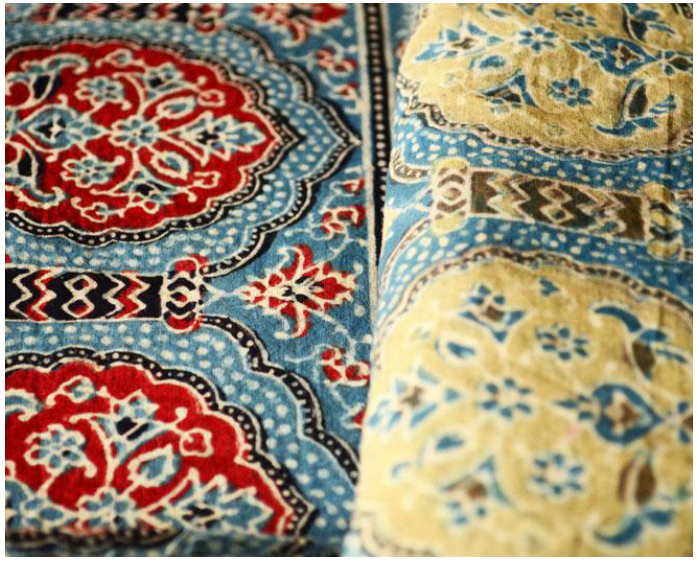

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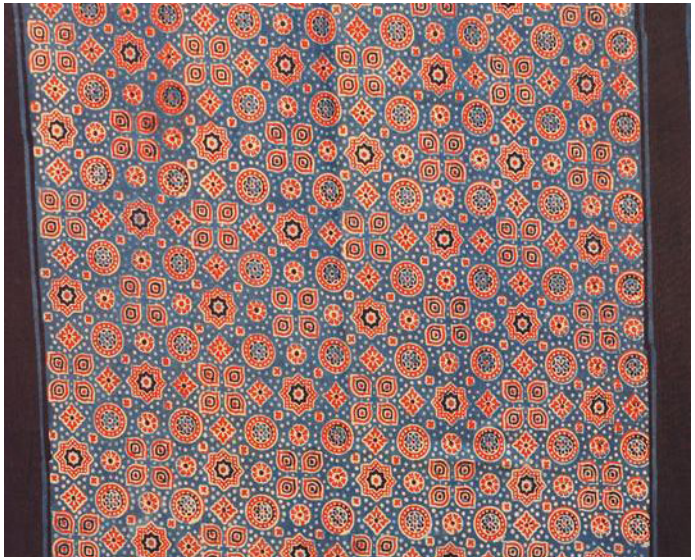

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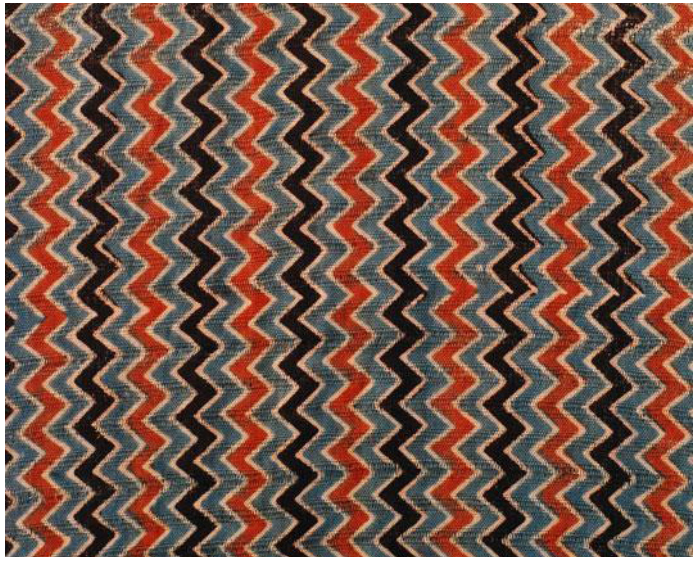

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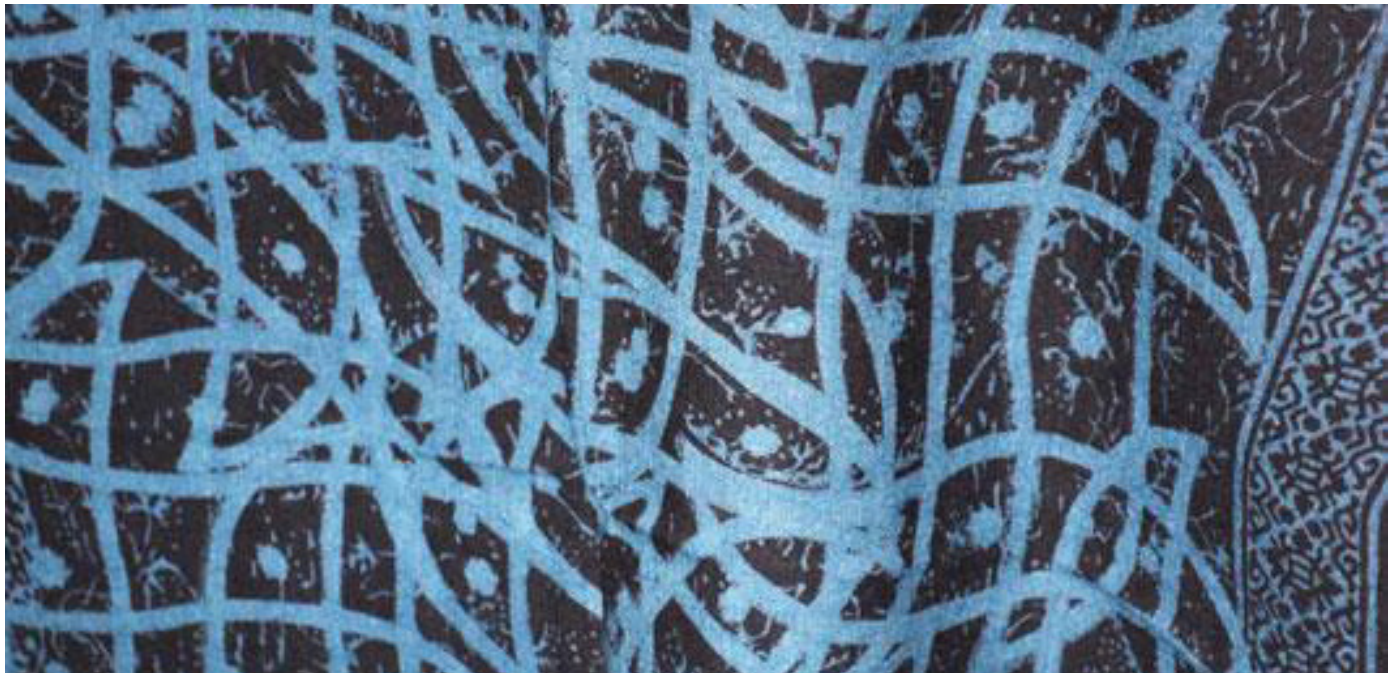

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